

Great Archaeological Sites in Torfaen



7. PILLOW MOUNDS ON COITY MOUNTAIN



It was in the second half of the 19th century that some archaeologists started to take note of a new type of monument, a rectangular mound, often with a shallow and narrow ditch or ditches across the middle, and sometimes with ditches around the sides. Various suggestions were made, the most popular of which was that they were some form of ancient burial mound. But other archaeologists were sceptical. No burials were ever found in them, and furthermore in various places there were local traditions that they had been built relatively recently to house rabbits. Eventually, after a considerable number had been excavated, the artificial rabbit warren theory won out. All the structural features that had been found in some pillow mounds could be accounted for – the lines of stones capping gullies cut into the old ground surface were ready-made burrows constructed for the rabbits that were to be introduced; the ditches, which showed little sign of the erosion, were for drainage to keep the environment of the mound dry to suit the rabbits' preference. Further research has shown that they were being built from about 1500 down to 1850.

Pillow mounds are often found in groups and there are two groups on Coity Mountain (SO 2433 0784 – SO 2433 0784). Here there is a definite clue as to their correct

identity: they lie at one end of a swathe of mountaintop that the Ordnance Survey 1st edition 6" map marks as 'Rabbit Warren'. They are typical Welsh upland examples, with fairly high and curving profile which would have help to keep the rain off, and it is possible that soil was dug out from the ditches from time to time and piled over the top to block off any burrows that the rabbits had dug to emerge from the top of the mound, which would also make it prone to waterlogging. None of them have ever been excavated, though, so we do not know whether they contained any artificial stone-roofed burrows. But the fact that this area was known to have been used to farm rabbits in the 19th century suggests that they are of no great age.



Coity Mountain is Open Access common land above Blaenavon. A footpath leading up the mountain from Forgeside passes near both groups of pillow mounds. Maps: OS Landranger Series sheet 161, Explorer Series Outdoor Leisure sheet 13.

Timeline (the asterisk indicates the time-span)



These pillow mounds are awaiting inclusion in the Historic environment Record (HER), but you can learn more about other pillow mounds and similar archaeological sites in Wales, by consulting it at <https://www.archwilio.org.uk/arch/>. Please read and observe the Conditions of Use. You can contact us via social media or through the methods given at the bottom of the page.